

## **Test Marketing Pasture Produced Artisan Cheeses**

**Location of Project:** Orland, California (Western Region)

**Purpose:** The project managers sought to work with a cheese manufacturer to transform an old milk-manufacturing site into a product development plant for specialty cheeses. They also sought partnerships involving custom manufacturing and co-packing to support the development of new local artisan cheese products, which would then be publicized through in-store sampling programs. The primary objectives for this project included:

- Conducting market research related to the niche market potential for artisan cheeses produced on pasture-based farms, to include surveys of retail cheese buyers, consumer focus groups, initial product development and test marketing;
- Developing product identity (label development) linked to pasture-based farms which would differentiate the production practices of grass-based dairy farmers from intensive dairy systems; and

- Conducting test marketing for a newly developed cheese with a brand image of quality and authenticity linked to sustainable production.

**Accomplishments:** Telephone and focus group interviews and in-store product sampling assessed the shopping habits and opinions of selected specialty cheese consumers. A total of 47 telephone interviews were conducted, 34 people participated in focus groups, and 36 people participated in the in-store sampling programs. Thirty-eight percent of the consumers interviewed on the telephone reported that they purchased specialty cheese on a weekly basis. Nearly half of those interviewed (48 percent) reported that specialty cheeses represented more than 75 percent of their total cheese purchases. Respondents purchased European specialty cheeses most frequently (57 percent), followed by California specialty cheeses (32 percent) and other U.S. specialty cheeses (11 percent).

**Lessons Learned:** Artisan cheese consumers must be able to sample an unknown cheese before they will buy it. Although price is not a major factor in purchases, consumers will not buy premium-priced cheese without sampling it first. Artisan cheese consumers are very reliant on the deli/cheese counter staff for recommendations and view cheese buying as an educational process.

They really appreciate unlimited sampling in an unhurried/low-pressure environment and consider themselves “food experimenters.” Store staff can have a significant impact on sales in this process, both by providing a high level of customer service and by possessing extensive knowledge of the product being sold.

Packaging for artisan cheeses appeared to be unimportant. Consumers used tasting and staff recommendations for cheese selection. Making sure the sales staff knows as much as possible about the cheese, who makes it, and what the farm practice is like, will help drive cheese sales. If cheese makers are selling through a distributor, they should be sure to educate the distributor about their product and do in-store demonstrations whenever possible.

Artisan cheese consumers pointed out that product quality and freshness and the perception of quality/freshness were far more important factors to them than whether a product was organic/sustainable or made locally. While artisan cheese consumers were somewhat interested in supporting organic or local production, they were not willing to do so at the expense of quality/freshness. However, consumers of artisan cheeses were very concerned about the use of hormones and antibiotics in dairy production systems. “Antibiotic-free” and “hormone-free” foods appear to be very important to the artisan cheese consumer.

**Conclusion:**

The information from this project should help producers more effectively target their promotional efforts for artisan cheese marketing. It should also help them educate their distributors and appropriate marketing partners to help determine what types of product descriptions and in-store marketing practices are the most effective in driving cheese sales.

For the sensory analysis (i.e., in-store sampling) part of the project, project managers believe it would have been helpful to carry it out in a more relaxed setting where people could focus on the food (and not their shopping list). The project managers would also have preferred to more closely control the way in which the cheese was served (e.g., temperature, humidity, time from cutting to consumption) and to have given more detailed instructions on how to complete evaluation forms.